Disability Awareness Teacher Toolkit



The overriding finding of our survey activities was that people lack accurate information about disabilities. This information deficit hampers their understanding not only of disabilities but also of people with disabilities. We agreed with the 80 interviewees that the first step in addressing this information gap is to do something to promote discussion of disabilities and people with disabilities in school and at home. Our interviewees identified five important concepts to include in a disabilities awareness teacher toolkit:

- Awareness
- Similarity
- Acceptance
- Uniqueness
- Inclusion

The following is an outline of the Disabilities Awareness Teacher Toolkit with some ideas for how each of the concepts can be introduced to students. *Connect-Ability* editors will be working with student volunteers this coming year to come up with additional ideas for teachers.

Preparing students to talk about disabilities

- Ask students to define "disability." Someone in the class may use the definition "A disability is someone who can't do something." Discuss what this definition emphasizes (can't do instead of can do). Does this definition describe everyone not just people with disabilites? Is a "disability" a "someone" or is it something a person has? Point out that defining disability is difficult because there are so many different disabilities and so many different people with disabilities.
- Ask students if they know someone with a disability. Ask them to describe the person and tell something that they have learned about that person or disability.
- Introduce "people first" language. Start with what you know when you speak about people with disabilities. Use "student with mental retardation" instead of "retarded student" or "kid with a hearing impairment" rather than "deaf kid." How can "people first" language change the way we treat people with disabilities?
- Ask students to discuss with their family members what they are learning about people with disabilities.

Concept #1: Awareness

Younger interviewees with disabilities believed that people make fun of people with disabilities because they are "uninformed." Many of our interviewees told us they didn't have enough information about disabilities. When they first met someone with a disability, few of them were encouraged to ask questions or talk about it.

- Choose a "Disability of the Week" and spend a few minutes talking about it. Post facts sheets (use www.nichcy.org for fact sheets) and ask the students to learn one fact a day to share with the class.
- Invite people with disability into the classroom for Q&A.
- Read the *Connect-Ability* newsletter. Discuss.
- Identify famous people with disability and discuss why they are inspiring and why people with disability might feel uncomfortable at the notion that they may be considered super heroes.
- Ask students to conduct an interview using the protocol on page 11. Discuss the findings.
- Browse *www.educationworld.com/a_lesson/lesson115.shtml* and *www.museumofdisability.org/teacher_resources_ELP.asp* for information on disabilities awareness.

Concept #2: Similarity

A quarter of our interviewees told us that a disabilities awareness program should emphasize similarities among all students and help students focus on how much we all have in common.

- Ask students how they are the same as the student sitting to their left.
- Introduce the notion that everyone not just students with disabilities needs help or assistance at some point. Talk about what it does to people with disability if we think they always need help. Ask how they felt when they were helped and wanted to do it themselves.
- Identify ways that a student with a disability could be a helper (e.g., a student using a wheelchair tutoring another student in math or a student with a learning disability teaching a friend how to play soccer).
- Ask about the difference between "good help" (ask first if help is needed) and poor help (I'll do it for you).
- Make a list of characteristics kids with disabilities and kids without disabilities have in common.

- Discuss the idea that if we became disabled we probably wouldn't feel much different from how we feel now. (We would still want to live with our families, go to school, play sports, enjoy our hobbies and have friends).

Concept #3: Acceptance

More than 20 percent of our interviewees told us that a disabilities awareness program should focus on increasing student acceptance and fostering more positive attitudes toward one another.

- Ask students to define attitude, and give examples of positive and negative attitudes. How do we feel when we encounter a negative attitude? A positive attitude?
- Introduce the notion of attitude as related to disability, and ask students to provide examples of both good and poor attitudes toward people with disabilities.
- Ask students to define acceptance.



Katie listens to Neil's perspective

- Ask students to define tolerance.
- Discuss the similarities and differences between acceptance and tolerance. Which comes first?
- Try this activity with students. Give some of the students a small candy or sticker and thank them for their cooperation. Continue class as usual telling the students that you will have a discussion with them later. In the discussion ask them to identify their feelings when they were excluded.
- Show how aging often causes people to develop a disability, and how the aging person would want to be accepted. Ask students to talk about older people they know.
- Use the word list (page 6) and ask students to choose one good and one poor word to describe disability, and explain why. Talk about how language affects our attitudes.
- Talk about using disability words as insults (retard, insane, cripple). What's wrong with it? How do we correct it?
- Ask for examples of how everyone can be included in some way, and how everyone has something to bring to the table.
- Talk about accommodations which enable students with disabilities to participate in general education classrooms and buildings (assistive technology, accessibility, Braille, hearing aides, wheelchairs, scribes, etc.).

Concept #4: Uniqueness

Our interviewees suggested students should take a look at how disability makes us unique. Students with disabilities are members of a diverse school community.

- Ask students to give examples of how they are unique.
- Introduce idea of "salad bowl" to highlight benefits of diversity and the richness of a nation with many cultures.
- Use "orchestra" analogy – each instrument is different but together they play beautiful music. Students with disabilities are doubly unique – each one has a unique personality and a disability that is unique to them. We can't say all students with learning disabilities are the same anymore than we can say all fifth graders are the same.
- Discuss the value of being different.
- Ask students to list ways in which students with disabilities may be different.
- Discuss how being different can be a strength.
- Discuss uniqueness v. sameness. Is there a contradiction in placing value on both of these? Why are both important? How are we the same and different? Which is more important?

Concept #5: Inclusion

Interviewees reported that emphasizing the concepts of similarity, acceptance and uniqueness would lead to more opportunities for students with disability to be included. Nearly 10 percent of them suggested an emphasis on the concept of inclusion. A discussion of what inclusion means to the education of all students would be an effective way to conclude a disabilities awareness program.

- Use group activities, games, simulations to convey idea of inclusion.

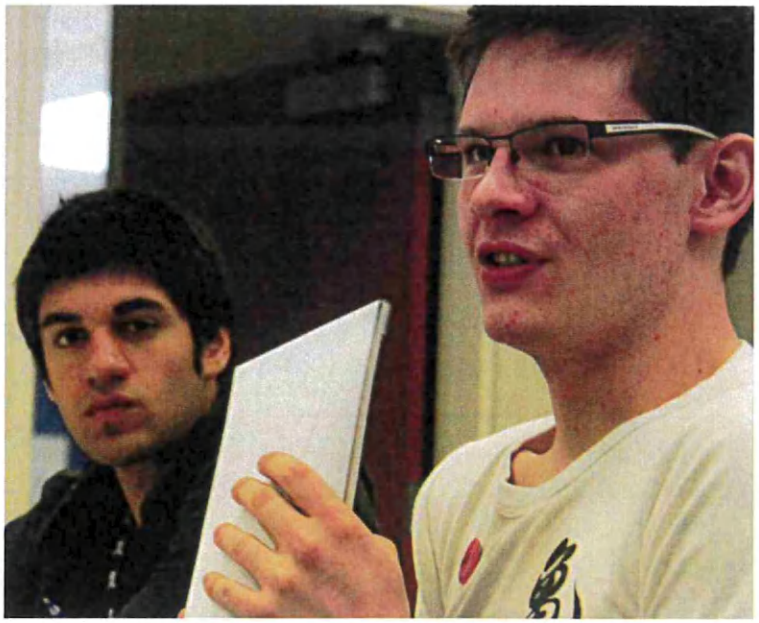
- Without introduction, begin by calling only on students who have dark hair; continue to ignore all other students even if they raise their hands. End the class by asking all students about the experience (what was the discriminating feature, how did those who were discriminated against feel, etc.)?
- What does inclusion mean? Is it important to all students? How is inclusion (the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes for all or nearly all of the day in special education classes or special schools) different from mainstreaming (the practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time periods based on their skills) and how is it different from integration (the process of becoming an accepted member of a group or community)? Discuss.
- Introduce notion of competition and how it may lead to exclusion. (Emphasis on grades and test scores can put students with disabilities in a difficult place).
- Discuss ways in which students can compete for their "personal best" instead of trying to "beat out" other students for the highest grades.
- Ask students to identify strategies they can use to include students with disabilities in different aspects of school and home life.
- Choose a setting (e.g., playground at recess, on the bus, at a Girl Scout outing, on a field trip, at a birthday party etc.) and role play some possible inclusive strategies.
- Talk about little acts of inclusion (saying "hi", giving eye contact, holding a door open etc.).

Next Steps

We will continue to work on our Disabilities Awareness Program and this teacher toolkit during the next year. We have already begun to write a Disabilities Awareness Quiz to help students expose some of the myths and misinformation about disabilities. Look for it on line at *www.nysut.org/connect.* We are committed to taking time during each of our writing workshops to completing the work we began with this issue. Students and teachers who have ideas about how we can help raise awareness through *Connect-Ability* should contact us at *cmchugh@nysutmail.org* or *tmcsween@nysutmail.org.*



Marissa interviews Cassie



Chester listens to Neil's report

Connect-Ability Interview Protocol

Name of Interviewer: _____

Interviewee (Please ask the interviewee to fill in the demographic information):

Gender: __Female __Male Age: __<14 __14-19 __20-24 __25-34 __35-54 __55+

Race: ___African American ___Hispanic
___Asian ___Native American
___Caucasian ___Other

Interviewee's experience with disability:
___Has a disability
___Has a family member or relative with a disability
___Has a friend or classmate with a disability
___Has worked with people with disabilities
___Has little or no experience with people with disabilities

Listen to your interviewee's answers then write down key points; use abbreviations; don't worry about spelling or grammar; review your notes to make sure you have everything; if you're using a tape recorder, ask permission first.

1. Tell me about your first experience with a person with a disability.

_____

If your interviewee has a disability, he/she may answer this question by talking about his/her own disability. You are asking your interviewee about his/her first experience with another person with a disability, NOT your interviewee's experience with disability if he/she has one.

2. What is it about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them?

_____

You are NOT asking your interviewee whether it's right or wrong to make fun of people with disabilities or whether he/she makes fun of disabilities. You are asking what it is about people with disabilities that causes others to make fun of them.

3. Why is it easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities?

_____

You are asking your interviewee why it's easy for people to feel sad about people with disabilities, NOT whether your interviewee feels sad about people with disabilities.

4. From this list of words (hand list on page 6 to interviewee) pick one GOOD word to describe DISABILITY and one POOR word to describe DISABILITY, and explain why you picked them.

_____

Give your interviewee time to look at the list. Then, ask for a GOOD word to use for DISABILITY, and ask why he/she thinks it's a GOOD word. Then, ask for a POOR word to use for DISABILITY, and ask why he/she thinks it's a POOR word.

Good word _____ Why?
Poor word _____ Why?

5. You've been hired to teach elementary school students about disabilities and people with disabilities. What is one idea/point/concept you would include in your teaching?

_____

You are asking your interviewee to give you ONE idea/point/concept about disabilities that he/she thinks would be important to include in teaching fourth or fifth graders about people with disabilities.